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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000808

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
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USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CARETAKER MINISTER NAYLA MOUAWAD STRESSES  
VISIBLE U.S. ASSISTANCE, SUPPORT FOR SLEIMAN

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Caretaker Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad, who hopes for a seat in the next cabinet, expressed concerns about the implications of regional developments for Lebanon. Praising President Sleiman's May 25 acceptance speech, particularly its past-tense reference to the "resistance," she warned that Hizballah had not intentions of giving up its arms. She predicts the opposition will not play a constructive role in cabinet formation, but appeared confident the next GOL would succeed in issuing a strong statement on its program.

2. (C) The March 14 majority now needs to focus on consolidating its work on the ground, Mouawad said, especially by courting "fringe" Christians and countering Sunni extremism. The U.S. can help by providing strong and visible support for President Sleiman (and refraining from addressing the "Siniora government"), including the rehabilitation of Kleyate airport and Cobra attack helicopters. End summary.

REGIONAL WHEELING AND  
DEALING AT LEBANON'S EXPENSE?

3. (C) CDA Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad at her home on May 29. Mouawad began by asking the Charge what was going on in the region right after Doha, Syria and Israel announce they are in negotiations, she said, and now we see progress in Iraq and hear stories of Iran-U.S. cooperation, and Israel is releasing Lebanese prisoners. We are worried, she complained, that the U.S. might make a deal at Lebanon's expense -- look how quiet you and the Europeans were when Hizballah took over Beirut. When Hizballah closed the airport, you should have put a ban on the Damascus airport, she said.

PRAISE FOR PRESIDENT SLEIMAN

4. (C) Mouawad agreed that President Sleiman had delivered a strong acceptance speech on May 25, citing his references to the Special Tribunal, a national defense strategy, Palestinian refugees, and the Lebanese diaspora as especially

important. Sleiman had been "very clever," she said; he did not promise miracles, but did lay out a strategic vision for the country. Charge emphasized that Sleiman's focus on the implementation of the Doha agreement was key.

15. (C) Mouawad also agreed that Sleiman's use of the past tense in reference to the "resistance" was worth noting, but warned that Hizballah would now use issues like Shebaa farms to advocate that its arms should be part of the new defense strategy. She rejected claims that an Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa would be a victory for Hizballah; rather, it would take away its pretext for "resistance" and score a victory for the GOL. By attacking Lebanese citizens in Beirut, Hizballah had shown it is a militia rather than a "resistance," something that would have been impossible to say three weeks ago. Mouawad added that she had stressed in cabinet meetings that the government should no longer refer to Hizballah as the "resistance" to underscore this point.

#### NASRALLAH'S RESPONSE

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16. (C) In response, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's May 26 speech had "dismantled" each of President Sleiman's points, she said, calling the speech "very dangerous." Nasrallah had clearly indicated Hizballah's intention to keep its arms as long as Israel exists. She cited footage shown on Hizballah's al-Manar TV footage of multi-confessional militias being trained to work with Hizballah as evidence that Hizballah was attempting to expand its credibility and avoid being labeled as an exclusively Shia organization.

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#### DETERMINED TO SERVE IN NEXT CABINET

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17. (C) On Siniora's designation as prime minister, Mouawad criticized independent MPs such as Pierre Daccache for not voting for Siniora because they did not view him as a "consensus" prime minister. The majority has the right to choose a prime minister of its choice, she said; the opposition has the Speaker of its choice (Amal leader Nabih Berri). She predicted that the opposition, unhappy with the choice of Siniora, would play an "unhelpful" role in cabinet formation by bringing "the worse ministers they have."

18. (C) On cabinet formation, Mouawad stressed the need to retain a seat for herself in order to help the Christians in her constituency of Zgharta -- and for Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh NOT to be a minister. (Note: As even Nayla freely admits, March 14 is expected to lose her parliamentary seat -- which her son Michel will now campaign for -- to Franjeh in the 2009 elections. End note.) Marwan Hamadeh (Telecom Minister in the now caretaker Siniora government) was indispensable for the next government, she said, although perhaps not with the same portfolio.

19. (C) Noting that there would be no cabinet without a president, Mouawad said she had warned President Sleiman to "be careful" (Nayla's husband, Rene, was killed shortly after his election as president in 1989). She hoped that Sleiman would bring independent or pro-March 14 ministers for his three seats, recalling that caretaker Cultural Affairs Tareq Mitri, whom everyone thought was pro-Lahoud, turned out to be Siniora's "ace up his sleeve" when Mitri took over the Acting Foreign Minister portfolio. Charles Rizk and Elias Murr, also initially considered Lahoud partisans, also converted to March 14, she noted.

10. (C) Mouawad appeared unconcerned about the "beyan wizari" (the government's first address to parliament outlining its program), stating that PM-designate Siniora was a "tough guy whose father had taught him to chew water before he swallowed." She believed that President Sleiman's acceptance

speech would serve as the basis for the statement.

MAJORITY MUST BE STRONG:  
NEEDS TO WORK ON CHRISTIAN "FRINGE"

11. (C) The Christians are March 14's weak point, she said, and Saad needs to work on this, especially the Christian "fringe" who are not with the majority but fear Hizballah's arms. We need to attract them to our side by giving "victory to their aspirations," she twice stated. March 14 Christians viewed the opposition's success at Doha in securing a blocking third in the cabinet as a failure (although she believed Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun was losing Christian support), she said, and they need to be comforted. Saad is convinced of this, she added, and PM-designate Siniora now understands that he cannot run a "dot.com" cabinet (referring to Siniora's penchant for thinking like a technocrat rather than as a politician).

AND COUNTER SUNNI EXTREMISM

12. (C) Aoun is making the Christians hate Sunnis, she continued. To counter this, the GOL should work on helping the Christians displaced from the mountains during the civil war, which would "pull the rug out from under Aoun," and promote development and educational projects in the north to counter Sunni extremism.

13. (C) Citing Beirut International Airport's vulnerability to Hizballah, Mouawad said that the rehabilitation of the Rene Mouawad/Kleyate airport in the north would be good in terms of promoting economic development in the impoverished north, countering Sunni extremism there, and countering Hizballah's ability to paralyze the country again.

14. (C) Mouawad said she was happy that Siniora had been

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chosen as prime minister, because Saad was needed "on the ground" to work the local crowds. People need to see him in Akkar and other areas, she said; he needs to help bring the Sunnis to moderation and see themselves as Lebanese first rather than associates of the likes of bin Laden. She credited the Hariris for the Lebanese Armed Forces' success in battling Sunni extremists at Nahr al-Barid.

U.S. SHOULD ROLL OUT  
RED CARPET FOR SLEIMAN,  
PUT MONEY WHERE ITS MOUTH IS

15. (C) Mouawad urged the USG to support President Sleiman to the maximum to help him stand up to the Syrians. He should not be allowed to stand by idly, as he did during Hizballah's recent siege of Beirut, while Hizballah upset the balance of power in the street. The U.S. and Europe have a responsibility to keep him on our side, she stressed. The U.S. should avoid talking about Hizballah, she advised, given the sensitivities in Lebanon, adding beseechingly, do not refer any more to the "Siniora government!" Instead, the U.S. should talk about President Sleiman and state- and institution-building.

16. (C) The U.S. should also provide visible assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), she stressed, adding that the opposition media always tried to say the U.S. has not contributed "even one bullet." Charge noted USDP Edelman's upcoming visit, as well as the recent large delivery of ammunition to the LAF as well as weapons, vehicles, and training. The LAF has excellent officers, Mouawad said, but we have failed it by not addressing issues like the chain of command, blaming Siniora, Hariri and Jumblatt as unwilling to tackle these issues.

¶17. (C) Mouawad, noting that she had told Secretary Rice in their last meeting that the LAF needed Cobra attack helicopters, stressed the importance both for the LAF's image and its efficiency. If we had had the helicopters last summer, we would not have had 170 martyrs at Nahr al-Barid, she said. Some believe the U.S. doesn't trust the LAF not to use the attack helicopters against Israel, she added regretfully.

SISON